



Oral History and Folklife Research Inc.

AN INTERVIEW WITH  
CARY LEWIS

Southwest Harbor, ME

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY  
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TRANSCRIBER  
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[Ed. note: The first few minutes of this interview are missing.]

Cary Lewis: Oh I think I was 26, 25, you know around there. I think it was anyway, well I think that but my memory doesn't serve me just exactly anymore.

Keith Ludden: So you were about 26, 25 when you started going on the boats?

CL: Yea

KL: Ok, and you went on your father's boat?

CL: Well, yea, I went with him for a few years before I, you know, until I took over one, captain of one.

KL: And when you were on your fathers boat, what were you fishing for?

CL: For herring, sardines.

KL: Ok

CL: We didn't actually fish for them, someone else fished for them. We brought them to the factory. We were a carrier, a sardine carrier. (Inaudible) to the factory. At that time, there was four factories. One at Prospect, one at Southwest [Harbor] here in town, one in Belfast and one in Bath.

KL: Were the fishing boats larger or were the carriers larger?

CL: Carriers are larger, at least at that time anyway. Some of the boats, today, are much bigger than the carrier would be because they fish offshore for large herring. We transported, generally speaking, the smaller ones, the smaller sized fish to the factories.

KL: Mhm. Was going on the boats something that you wanted to do?

CL: Yes, well, yes but since I've been hit with a lot of the time thinking, I said, "I wonder why why I did that? [chuckles] Yes, it was my doings, no retirement but there was some profit sharing, but generally there was no retirement or anything of that nature involved, but you either liked it or you didn't like it, I guess, so I liked it.

KL: You enjoyed it?

CL: Yeah.

KL: What did you enjoy about it.

CL: Well I, I guess it was more or less you are under more authority, seemed like you were free to do more than you would if you were laboring. I'd say that probably a little more freedom, maybe, I don't know if I would change. Problem is, I look at it today back then and I'd wonder if I had as much freedom as I think I did.

KL: What would a typical day be like? How would your day start?

CL: Well I don't know if this is typical but we would be in position, probably early morning, to take aboard the fish aboard from the seiners, the ones that caught the fish. We'd go up early hour, and we'd start in by daybreak, usually, so you could get back to the factory at a reasonable hour [and] they could work on it, and so on. I don't know, I just wonder if there's such a thing as a typical day. That's about all I can tell you.

KL: You would go from where your boat was anchored or docked and go out and meet the seiners?

CL: Yes, in a way of speaking. Later on when I first went, there was just inshore seiners, what I call seiners. Fisherman, who had like a lobster boat or something, for he towed along a dory. Some kind of the netting were in the dorys.

KL: Nets were towed in dorys?

CL: Yes, until they were used, they were put out. Usually they would shut off a cove or strip of land and shut it off completely. They could tell by either or someone would fly—either by plane

or fathom meter, know just what there was in the cove. How many there would be in a cove, I'm talking about, the quantity of fish. They got trained, people would fly and after awhile they got it so that it could tell the amount just looking down. It looked like a ledge; it's dark, a dark area. A ledge stays put, stays right where it is. If you watch this dark area long enough, they might move so you know it's not a ledge. I have heard of them saying that to shut off a ledge, that means that they relied on this pilot, that there was fish down there but it would be a ledge. Put twine around the ledge there and they had to bring it back. Back in the old days, they did it by hand and as hydraulics progressed, they used to have a power block which brought it. It did all the heavy work and put them in—we stored restored them in the dory. That's generally what the inshore seiners did or how they [did it]. If their boats are small, they'd have to store them in dorys and some might have upwards of three or four dorys in tow, all netting (inaudible)

KL: They would tow these behind the boats?

**9:15**

CL: Yes, they would tow them behind and if there was a place that someone might have seen fish in, then they might anchor in there and wait for somebody or they'd go out around in a smaller boat with a fathom meter. That's all they had for electronics back then. I'm not sure if they're any better now, course they are non existent now. When they catch them now, it's generally used for bait. There's a factory in Canada that sells herring, I think. Sometimes they'd come up and get some from these fellows, if they have them.

KL: Now, how did you get the fish from the net? Did they go from the net to the fishing boat and then to your boat?

CL: Well, what they would do is, what we would call, shut off an area. The netting went from shore to shore. They might even take a piece of the shoreline and bring the net all around to corner the fish. Then they would have another net that was like a square net. They'd run the fish into the square net, into a smaller area. And then take a very small purse seine, and go around it (inaudible) the fish up and jam them up in the water—a small area, a very small area. An area—when I started out we used nets, and eventually we put pumps in—pumps, and each carrier set the pump into the fish and sucked them aboard.

KL: From the seine net into the fishing boat?

CL: Yes

KL: Then how did you get them on the sardine carrier?

CL: Well that's what I'm talking about. This is the sardine carrier.

KL: Ok, I see.

CL: We'd anchor—we'd come up alongside the square pocket and get anchored off and situated so we wouldn't drift off. They'd take this little small seine and go around and attach it to the sides of the boat. So when they'd come around and jammed up the fish, they would be thick enough that you could pump or you could use a net to heist them aboard. They used to have a (inaudible) a long time ago when they used the nets. I used a pump most of my life—well, I never used a new Back in the day, they used nets but I used a pump most of the time. My father used a net myself. My father did, the people before me used nets. I used the pump all the time

KL: So did they stop using the nets in the 1940's?

CL: No, later than that, must've been in the 1960's. It might have ended around 1960's, I would guess that it ended. I never used them myself. [My] father did, and the people before him. I think before he got through, they had pumps aboard his boat too. These fish pumps have been around all of my time anyway. Can't tell you just when it stopped and started because (inaudible) I don't know. The herring was always around but he didn't really do much until the 1940's and 1950's. (Inaudible)

KL: Why was there so much interest then?

CL: In the 1940's and 1950's? I suppose, this is just my opinion. Things got more convenient about the timing, and the timing got more convenient, and the guy had a product they could sell. (Inaudible) I can't really tell you, but I can almost—Back in the early days, they would pack fish sporadically because they couldn't get them at all times. They could only get things at a certain times. I don't think always the quantity was there or not, I just—

KL: Did they use pumps to offload them at the cannery as well?

CL: Yes they did, well they might have had a bigger pump to do that.

KL: So you had to be in place, ready to go out and meet the fishing boats at daybreak, is that right?

CL: A typical day would be like that but they didn't all work out that way, because after awhile they put cold storage in so they can keep fish in overnight. These little fish would deteriorate in no time at all unless you had them brined in the salt heavily or cool, refrigerated in tanks that were cooled by refrigeration. Therefore, they could keep them overnight but before that, I can just imagine it was a hard job to keep the things them from spoiling.

KL: So you had to work pretty fast?

CL: Yes, generally speaking, the sooner you got in to the factory—the women, they would call the women in and they could go to work. A woman's day, or a packer might not be from seven o'clock to four o'clock, it might be from twelve o'clock 'til nine o'clock at night or something. They work really hard. (Inaudible). Real hard

KL: What was the name of your boat?

CL: I was on several of them, it wasn't just one—the *Joyce Marie*, the *Edward M. Edward M* was probably the smallest carrier, [about] sixty-five feet. The *Joyce Marie* [was] only seventy feet but it carried more, a bigger boat.

KL: Did you stay with the *Joyce Marie* for quite awhile?

CL: Yes, a couple of times I did. Someone else took her over for awhile then they gave her up. The ones that gave her up went purse seining, so it came back so we took it. That's how we happened—why I happened to have it twice. I don't know if this stuff would make sense to anyone, but—

KL: I understand the other boats were named after Stinson's daughters?

CL: Yes, his wife, *Mary H*, I had that one once for awhile. *Ida May*, *Lou Ann*, and *Joyce Marie*. I think they're all dead now except for the boys, Charlie and his brother. I think they live in Prospect still. I'm not sure of that. I never seen much of them, when I was working for them, or seining, so I don't really know...

KL: Can you describe one of the boats to me?

CL: The *Joyce Marie* was seventy feet. Had seventy-seven hogs [hogsheads?] in capacity and Hogs are seventeen and a half bushel, which is an old English measure. Don't ask me why, but that's just the way it was. The *Joyce Marie* had a wheel house and I had a bunk in the wheelhouse. The engine was underneath in the stern, that was a 12V or V12. There were some bunks forward a little, cuddy—what we called a cuddy, an entrance that went down to the bow area, where the bunks were (inaudible). Not ideal. I don't know—

KL: Is it close quarters?

CL: Yes

KL: How many men were on the boat?

CL: Two, the Captain and an engineer. We used to have two boats per factory when I entered the job market. They cut that out to one boat per factory and we went from here to everywhere to and everywhere to deliver the thing, so a boat would go wherever it was wanted. I might go to Belfast, and then to Prospect Harbor more than anywhere because it was local. We [were] close most of the time. I might be up in the Rockland area, Vinalhaven (inaudible). I might have to go to Belfast. Occasionally went to Bath. Sometimes in the fall of the year, seems like there' be some fish caught up there that we'd just got involved in and we'd go to Bath. We'd go up there.

**23:40**

KL: Did you pick up the fish from more than one location?

CL: No, I don't think [we did]. If we didn't get our amount, which has happened many a time; that they wanted, then we'd go along with what we had. I don't think I've ever done two places in the same day or anything.

KL: It was usually just one run a day?

CL: Yes, it was more likely we wouldn't have enough time to do more than one.

KL: If there were bunks on the boat, you must have spent a night on the boat sometimes? What was that like?

CL: It was alright. Most of the time you get tired enough that it didn't bother you. They were all the same, usually, a lot of times we'd be tied up somewhere at some wharf and there might be more than one boat tied together. Then you'd be talking and I don't think I ever go to the bar room. [Laughs] I think some people did. Just me talking, I would say not. I'm too cheap to buy beer. I didn't have much beer on the boat at all. The fella that was with me there, he was an alcoholic. I didn't know that until a long time later. We'd just talk, (inaudible) scuttlebut, whatever you want to call it.

KL: What were the favorite topics?

CL: I don't know if there was a favorite, topic. (inaudible) probably the fish was the top of the topic but we mostly talked about fish. Who had fish and who was lugging the fish. When you're in the business, you know everyone else's business to a certain degree. You knew something about them but not everything but you knew where the fish were.

KL: Was it pretty hard work?

CL: Staying up, sometimes we'd be up all night. You'd have to go a long distance was. You might not even have hardly have any fish in your hold. This was like purse seining. [We'd go] purse seining at night. We would leave the factory and chase these seiners around. Several times it's been all night long—Not see anything and not even have anything all day. You might be loaded, you might not be —any amount in between. It got hard to stay up all night and all day—go up to the bay and fall asleep. That's bad. If you go to sleep, you don't know if you're on a ledge, you're going to or run ashore or what. You almost had to force your eyes to stay open. I did, anyway

KL: It's a good way to invite an accident.

CL: Yes, more than once.

KL: Did some people fall asleep at times?

CL: Yes, for different reasons; not paying attention. I could get so tired I could fall right off the stool. I could just almost pray for a few minutes just to close my eyes. After the engineer got straightened out, he was great, he would relieve me at any time [and I would] could rest.

**29:10**

KL: If you were Captain, you had to stay at the wheel?

CL: You were responsible for it [until you got] to the factory. Unless after awhile someone stayed with you for a long time, they would know how to do this stuff too. That's generally what happened. It wasn't the greatest job in the world, so it was hard to keep people but we somehow got through it.

KL: When did you stop going on the boats?

CL: I can tell you, 1988. I know that one. I know that date, because we couldn't make a living. We'd do nothing for so long. I think my company might have stayed in business for five more years after that. Seemed like they had one boat that was on duty—well no, probably more than that. Maybe a couple of them. You just couldn't make a living, that's all

KL: When did you start to see the sardine business decline?

CL: It's always had its ups and downs. It wouldn't be two years (inaudible) that might be good. It might be one year good and one year bad it seemed to me. But then they [got] purse seining. When I say purse seining, I mean going offshore a little further and getting these bigger herring. they'd chopped them up and made steaks out of them instead of packing them traditionally like a sardine would be. That brought in a good deal of money. I don't see how anyone could stay in that business without purse seining. [There] just wasn't the quantity of fish around.

KL: Why do you think the fishing declined so much?

CL: I never found that out. I don't know whether it was from overfishing or from pollution. There seemed to be d I'm not sure that the smaller herring were related to the offshore populations, the bigger fish (inaudible) But it seems like it must be. I'm sure somebody would know. I don't know. I've never heard anyone say the reason as to why they thought the herring disappeared.

KL: By the late 1980's you just couldn't make a living out of it?

CL: No, before that actually. They've cut out purse seining. They couldn't sell anymore of these — and I don't know if you've ever seen them in the cans. They used to cut them crosswise and I call them steaks. They had a good market for them for the longest time. I don't know if there was foreign stuff coming in, or what the story was. They used to pack those all the time when they couldn't get good fish. I don't know the answers to most of this stuff. (Inaudible) I don't know whether Willard Colson, which is a father to Peter—I've always wanted to ask him if he had a theory (inaudible) as to why the herring just depleted. (Inaudible)

KL: I'm gonna be talking to him tomorrow and I'll see if I can ask him that.

CL: Oh, you're going down to see him?

KL: Yes.

CL: I don't know how well he is, I never see him anymore.

KL: I haven't met him yet.

CL: He's knowledgeable. he was, the last I knew, very knowledgeable, and he could really tell you things he'd been in. He's been doing it all of his life, I believe (inaudible) in the area of manufacture. He was well up in the company I think he was Charlie Stinson's right hand man, really.

KL: In the 1940s, did they send a lot of fish to the troops?

CL: I can't tell you. I don't know. It seems to me they had great oval cans. They that had big herring in them. Whether that was during *World War II* or not, I don't know. It seems like it would have fit the occasion, I think. A can kept a long time, as long as anything. I don't know, but I wouldn't be surprised (inaudible).

KL: Tell me about your last day on the boat.

CL: I don't know if I could do that either. There wasn't much to say other than we weren't working. I think I finished out the season and I decided that that was it. I couldn't Just see another year like that. I think I'd have gone crazy not doing anything, hanging around and not being active. I think that's the worst thing—well, maybe not the worst thing, but a bad thing. (Inaudible) to me particularly, I was going to say anyone, but to me—

KL: Were you just sitting at the dock a lot?

CL: Yes, but it was—Purse seining, gave us quite a bit more money and they just weren't taking the big fish anymore. We had to rely on whatever people caught inshore. When I first started, smaller herring it just wasn't—even though they'd guarantee you a little fee, you still couldn't (inaudible). It's like being somewhere an doing nothing. I catches up with you after a while. That's about all I can say.

KL: Do you remember your first day on the boat?

CL: No, I can't I was with my father, I know that. I don't know where we'd been or anything.

KL: What was your father like?

CL: He was a sharp man, probably about five foot five.

KL: How many years had he been working the boat before you started working?

CL: He'd been there for about forty years probably. He'd been doing it practically all his life. They use to do various things back then. In the winter, they'd go musseling, I guess, but that was before my time. They used to go and stay. I wouldn't see him in forever and ever, it seemed like. He'd be on the water, I suppose, you know, hanging around waiting for something to happen, I guess. I really can't say.

KL: Were the weirs before your time?

CL: There were a few weirs in my beginning but they soon fizzled out. I was kind of glad, too because our job was to go around and check these weirs. We didn't have any communications and it was poor back then, it was terrible.

KL: This would have been in the 1950s or earlier?

CL: No, '60s when I started, but I remember this fellow over in Bar Harbor. He had two or three old rickety weirs (inaudible). I was with my father and we had to go and see if there was enough fish in each of them to haul back to the factory. To me that got old some quick if you weren't making a lot of money at all.

KL: Were there many fish in the weirs?

CL: Occasionally there would be enough but not on a steady basis. I was itching to get through. By the time we got to the last one, my father didn't build her up. I was glad of that. [Laughs]

KL: When did they stop using the weirs?

CL: Around here probably—I'm going to say 1965, I'm not sure how accurate I am.

KL: About mid 1960s?

CL: Yes, but down on the Canadian side I think they have some by Eastport. I think there was still weirs down there. I know there was in Canada but (inaudible). I heard about them making about a million bucks out of one of them. No one else had any fish except this one weir [at] Grand Manan . He had boats and boats and boats come. It was odd that one place had a lot of fish and there wouldn't be any anywhere else. I don't know if there are any weirs down there or not. I'm sure there were weirs long after they got through up here.

KL: Can you explain to me how the weirs worked?

CL: Well, I could try. A weirs has a rounded body and what we call a wing, or wings. These were made out of birch branches or something. Some would have two wings and some would have one wing. The wing would go out in a direction, probably inshore. The weirs would be our where there's deep water (inaudible) They had to have water. They had to be in deep enough water to draw fish; the fish wouldn't smother. But anyway, the body of the fish wouldn't be exactly in a

circle. I don't know if I can explain it. It was made so the fish (inaudible) go round and round. They'd come in an opening. The opening would be just exactly open, it would have a kind of flare to it, so when the fish would come around, they'd hit this flare and wouldn't go out through the opening, and it would shy them off to the inside of the weir long enough so they got on the other side. I suppose they come the other way, because the other side was made the same way (inaudible) reverse direction. I'm not telling you—I've seen weirs defy anything, seems like. But anyway, it's just basically a round holding pen. Some have the seine knitting all around it. Some have stakes, like birch stakes driven in quite closely. But anyway, the herring is supposed to stay inside this round thing. This is kind of crude, kind of crude telling you.

KL: That's fine, I've never seen one, so this gave me an idea as to what it would look like.

CL: Well, why they'd have this long wing or leader, because of the tides. When the tides went out, they'd follow the shore line. (Inaudible) This leader would shy them into the body. Either way, incoming tide (inaudible) these herring came out, would hit the other side and do the same thing supposedly would run along the shoreline during low tide and when the fish would pass by it, it would shy it into the weir. When the tide came in, the herring would enter the weir on the opposite side.

KL: You'd have to dip them out of the weir?

CL: Yes, they'd have a hole cut in the thing or something, low tide. They'd use a seine to go around and jam these fish so you could pump them. I was going to say something else (inaudible) You'd have to laugh because people try and get by with just about anything. I suppose it happens in any business, but you'd have to laugh sometimes. Funny thing, some of this works, too.

KL: Is there anything you want to point out to me that I might not be thinking about, that I'm overlooking?

CL: [I was going to have you] look at some of this stuff, but I forgot about them.

KL: Those are some great photos.

CL: There's a photographer well known, [ conversation about a photographer].

KL: There's one other thing I'd like to do. That is, I'd like to see if I can get a photo of you  
Would that be okay?

CL: It's alright with me.

END OF INTERVIEW